Touchstone



The Sesquicentennial, the National Park Service, and a Changing Nation

It’s a great irony of our history: the places of such fierce combat during the U.S. Civil War became, in the decades that followed, quiet places of reflection and reconciliation, where veterans gathered to heal rather than cause wounds, where the nation looked for regeneration. For most of its history, the National Park Service facilitated this healing process, encouraging Americans to derive from these places of conflict common values and virtues that would bind rather than divide. But more recently, the role of the National Park Service and the Civil War sites it manages has become more complicated, reflecting evolving scholarship and the varied demands of a public that does not see the Civil War in monolithic terms. For the National Park Service and the nation at large, the sesquicentennial of the Civil War is an important touchstone on an evolutionary journey that has provoked both praise and censure in a nation still struggling to reckon with its most tumultuous, destructive, and transformative epoch.

No historic event has a more complicated place in American culture than the Civil War. We can’t even agree on its name, re-phrased variously depending on one’s perspective: the War Between the States, the War of Northern Aggression, the War of the Rebellion (once the official U.S. government name), the War for the Union, the War for Southern Independence, the Second American Revolution. Born of conflict, the memory of the war has a conflicted history of its own. In the immediate post-war years, an abiding sectional hostility simmered—personal and deep, it was rooted in the immense personal loss suffered by American families and communities. Later, as the quest for reconciliation reigned, a narrative of mutual virtue evolved, statues of Confederate heroes went up in the U.S. Capitol, and federal tax dollars funded the memorialization of Confederate graves. Some protested angrily at the*absence* of sectional hostility, at the seemingly easy acceptance back into the cultural fold of a people and section that had been bent on the Union’s destruction.

Many white southerners rallied around the memory of the Confederacy as they

constructed a post-war society akin to apartheid. To many Americans—especially African Americans—the Confederate battle flag (indeed, the Confederacy itself) became not a symbol of courage and sacrifice, but an emblem of oppression.

> It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of the Civil War's battlefields in the process of national reckoning with our most deadly national epoch.

A people's view of their own history always reflects the views of those who have power. In the decades following the Civil War, Southerners quickly regained political voice, and thus our American narrative has somewhat happily and uncommonly incorporated into its collective story the view of the ostensible losers in a national rebellion. Since the centennial of the war in 1961, the women's rights movement and the subsequent upsurge in American women's history has produced new work on the role of civilians in the war. Likewise, the Civil Rights movement gave voice to African Americans and other minorities, who have in turn sought (rightly so) to tell stories that reflect the immense and complicated role played by slaves and slavery in the evolution of the nation. Political power has expanded among all classes of Americans—rich and poor—and so history has delved beyond the Great Men of the past to reflect the experiences of everyday people. We are in a constant process of taking second looks at our past.

This process of re-examination has threatened the cherished view held by some Americans that our nation should have, as battlefield preservationist Jerry Russell has written, a singular, "shared understanding of American history," a "culture that unites us, not one which divides us." The Civil War would seem to be an obvious point of friction in that quest, but early in the twentieth century the war's battlefields were places where sectional animosities and lingering resentments could be laid aside. They became (and remain) places where the common virtues of Americans North and South were celebrated, where by focusing on American "good," the ugly blemishes of history could be painted over in the name of national unity. For more than a century, the war's battlefields became something of a refuge for a nation still wounded by war.

The modern 69th New York Infantry leads a procession of more than 2,000 through the streets of Fredericksburg toward the Sunken Road, accompanied by church bells tolling. Photograph courtesy of the National Military Parks.

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of the Civil War's battlefields in the process of national reckoning with our most deadly national epoch. It is likely that the United States preserves more acres of battlefield land in its borders than the rest of the world *combined*. For nearly a century—from the creation of the first federally owned battlefield site at

Antietam in 1890—Americans demanded of their battle sites a congenial neutrality. At Manassas, the deed conveying Henry Hill from the Sons of Confederate Veterans to the National Park Service (NPS) stipulated that the government would "care for and preserve this battlefield without prejudice to either the North or the South" and not detract from "the glory due Confederate heroes." At Fredericksburg in the 1930s, when someone objected to the NPS exhibits in the new visitor center on the Sunken Road, arguing that they ought to provide greater context for the battles, he received a rather terse reply from the NPS. "To what end?" the exhibit planner wrote. "The consequences of a major war are infinite … and these things shift with the bias of every writer." Yet, he declared, "one result is simple, striking and indisputable … Death admits of no argument."

In the long history of our battle sites, there have been few hard questions and little discussion of the larger issues that either gave rise to or were resolved by the war. Instead, the most intense debates raged about remarkably specific questions: was Sickles (not Lee!) wrong at Gettysburg? What if McClellan had committed all his men at once at Antietam? The battlefields became places of reverence, engines of empathy, platforms for national reconciliation (none of which are bad things). Visitors and NPS historians alike engaged in a rhetoric of affection and nostalgia that still persists. At the dedication of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park in 1928, the keynote speaker from Massachusetts declared, "We do more than to dedicate these fields in memory of things which have passed. We consecrate them, in the spirit of Robert E. Lee and of Abraham Lincoln, to a more perfect understanding between the South and the North, and to an abundant increase in brotherly love." A slim 1930s volume of regulations that governed the work of rangers at the nation's various military parks admonished, "The story of the guides shall be limited to the historical outlines approved by the superintendent and shall be free from praise or censure." This language still exists in the federal regulation governing licensed guides at NPS sites.

To be sure, interpretation at NPS sites has evolved over the decades, mirroring academia's progression from a focus on great leaders to increased attention to the experiences of the common soldiers and civilians amidst war. This trend found its greatest expression in the proliferation of living history programs at NPS sites in the 1960s and 1970s. To the details of battle, the NPS added the details of the human experience. A 1978 publicity photo for a living history camp at Chancellorsville proclaimed, "Here at Chancellorsville the National Park Service has attempted to recreate in every possible detail the camp of a Confederate ordnance detachment." But this trend only perpetuated the intense interest in the details of war—rations, equipment, uniforms, the fabric and rhythms of camp and battle—without reference to the war's larger issues.

Interpretation of the battles themselves reflected change, too. The National Park Service sought to understand its battles and landscapes better, and so in the 1960s commenced an intensive effort to document battles through minutely detailed battle maps. Later, on-site historians gave increased, often singular

attention to the experience of men in combat. The use of quotes from soldiers' letters and diaries, carefully related to the specific site of a certain event, made for a powerful combination. While these efforts surely told us important things about the war on the ground, they did not challenge the concept of battlefields as a place of national refuge. The focus on shared experiences, shared sacrifice—the commonalities rather than the differences between soldiers—reinforced the traditional (and rather ironic) role of battlefields as places of congenial neutrality, healing empathy, and patriotic expression.

Of course, historians and the more learned fringes of the American public continued to explore the war's many complexities in academic journals and thick books. New scholarship exploded myths, corrected long-cherished historical misperceptions, and provoked public discourse about the cause, purpose, nature, and significance of the war itself. But into the 1980s, the traditional role of Civil War battlefields as sanctuaries within our society remained largely unchanged: they were places of commemoration, places of reflection, sites whose stories reflect larger American virtues and honor *most* participants. Indeed, the dream of a singular, uncontested memory of the Civil War was a reality for a century on America's battlefields. Historians working at these sites continued to focus on narrow themes of history and commemoration, largely avoiding controversy—and largely ignoring the swirl of new thought that engulfed Civil War historiography in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. Their cautious, non-controversial practice of history sustained the public perception of NPS historians as memorialists.

Re-enactment of Civil War scene at Gettysburg in July 2013. Photograph courtesy of the National Military Parks.

Many Americans have found comfort in this image of NPS sites and staff. But not all. In February 2011, my colleague Steward Henderson and I gave a tour, "Forgotten: Slavery and Slave Places in Fredericksburg." We had given the tour before, but that day's audience consisted of about 70 members from three historically black churches in Fredericksburg. The tour went well, with a high energy level all around. In the midst of it, an older gentleman pulled me aside and said, "Are you going to get in trouble for doing this?"

I said, "I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean."

"You know," he said. "Your bosses. I didn't think you guys were allowed to do things like this."

During the day, I received a number of comments along the same lines, expressing surprise that we, NPS staff at a battlefield site, would create a tour dealing with slavery. Clearly, this group of people perceived me and my colleague as part of an organization bound by rigid (if unspoken) limits of inquiry and interpretation, an organization at best ambivalent and at worst

hostile to an interpretation of the war that strayed beyond traditional topics or sites.

But more importantly, the question highlighted a great irony: while the traditional role of Civil War battle sites as sanctuaries offers comfort to some, for others it is a barrier to their engagement with both the history of the war and the National Park Service. As one man explained at a community forum just months after the tour, sustaining a positive image of the war meant sustaining a positive image of the "white-supremacist Confederacy." The American tradition of "celebrating" the war through its battlefields—re-enactments, pageants, concerts, idolatry, and even commemorative ceremonies—has become, to some, offensive.

Something else renders the National Park Service's relationship with the Civil War and its battlefields more complicated than most. Tens of millions of Americans have a blood relationship with a Civil War soldier, the men whose deeds the battlefields were set aside to remember. These Americans often see the war not with the dispassion of a historian (even an amateur historian), but through the intensified lens of a family connection. Many visitors to NPS sites often understand the war in a way that reflects generations of conventional wisdom rather than historical knowledge acquired through formal study. Unlike any other event beyond our direct memory, the Civil War has constituent groups that patrol the intellectual universe, intent on protecting and advocating a specific memory of the war—usually one that reflects positively on their ancestors, communities, or regions. Historians have demonstrated that many aspects of this "true history" (as it is often called by heritage groups) are at best incomplete and at worst not true at all. Still, the beliefs endure in parts of the general public—and most commonly in those members of the public who visit National Park Service battlefield sites.

This personal connection to the past has helped shape our nation's relationship with and understanding of the war. At least as it relates to the Civil War, we as a nation have permitted the personal motivations of soldiers (often imperfectly remembered or revised over time) to define the cause and purpose of war for the public. If you work at a Civil War site any amount of time—say, more than a week—you will hear something like this from a visitor: "My great-great-grandfather didn't own slaves. He sure as hell didn't fight to preserve slavery. He fought to defend his home, the way of life of his community and state. The Civil War wasn't about slavery, and you are wrong to tell people it was."

Visitors place flowers atop the famous stone wall at Fredericksburg, in tribute. Photograph courtesy of the National Military Parks.

We have heard such assertions so often they qualify as a mantra. Of course, virtually every credentialed historian in America accepts a connection between

slavery and the Civil War, and most of them see the connection as central to its cause, its progress, and its outcome. But to acknowledge, for example, that the South formed the Confederacy largely to protect the institution of slavery is to suggest to the millions of Confederate descendants that their ancestors fought to sustain what by any measure was a vile institution—perhaps the darkest stain on America's national fabric. Many remain vehemently opposed to scholarly arguments about the war and slavery, and don't hesitate to tell you. It was this vehemence—first articulated by the founders of the United Confederate Veterans and United Daughters of the Confederacy more than a century ago—that inspired the nation to simply avoid the topic and focus on the shared virtues of men fighting for life and principle (whatever they might have been) on our nation's battlefields.

Since the 1980s—as scholarship from earlier decades started to take root in the American mind, and as scholars started exploring the role of historical memory in American culture—Americans have increasingly seen the Civil War not through the lens of personal connection, but through the prism of national purpose. This is by far the most important change in the cultural landscape of Civil War history in the last three decades, and it is one that portends dramatic change to come. Among those changes will be that America's battlefields will likely no longer provide the quiet and happy historical refuge where history is neatly compartmentalized to provide comfort for Americans struggling to understand and reckon with their past.

The sesquicentennial is a touchstone in a process of change that began in the 1980s and will continue for years to come. The scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated clearly that the Civil War constituted far more than just a confrontation between men in uniform on battlefields, and the turn to studies of historical memory and historic places helped launch the National Park Service into a new era. Edward Linenthal's *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (1991) gave NPS public history professionals important context on the evolution of the industry in which they worked. Later studies by David Blight and many others illuminated the conscious manipulation of memory in the name of national reconciliation, and its consequences—including, notably, the alienation of the African American community from the history of the Civil War.

The first recognizable hints of change came in 1991, when Congressional staffer Heather Huyck (who holds a PhD in history and was formerly an NPS employee) inserted language into new boundary legislation for Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park that directed the park to interpret not just military events, but the impact of the war on civilians. Similar language followed in other bills related to Civil War sites. Throughout the 1990s, NPS battle sites responded in various ways to the emerging scholarship and greater understanding of the foibles and virtues of seventy years of practicing public history on Civil War battlefields. In a new General Management Plan, Antietam National Battlefield placed increased emphasis on the relationship between the battle and the Emancipation Proclamation. Monocacy National Battlefield embraced themes that viewed that site through the lens of the civilians who

worked and shaped the land. At Manassas, archeological investigations illuminated not just the battle, but also the lives of slaves and free blacks who lived in the area. By mid-decade, close observers could see change happening at many NPS battle sites.

In 1998, superintendents of Civil War sites across the country met in Nashville with an eye toward formalizing the changes already appearing at battle sites across the land. While the conference generated agreement for collective action on issues like recreational use, managing layers of historic resources, and road expansion in parks, the issue of interpretation clearly emerged as the headline. The Nashville conference commenced a process that would result in a service-wide interpretive plan, called *Holding the High Ground*. It was this plan that, a decade later, would become the basis for NPS involvement in the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. In their introduction, the authors of *Holding the High Ground* stated:


The proximity of time and place matter. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, have attended real-time programs on the original site at Fredericksburg, 150 years removed. Photograph courtesy of the National Military Parks.

The challenge that faces the National Park Service today is a huge one: to convey the significance and relevance of the Civil War in all its aspects while at the same time sustaining the Service's invaluable tradition of resource-based interpretation (a concept that is at the very foundation of the National Park Service's mission). … This plan urges a broader approach to interpreting the Civil War—it seeks to have parks challenge people with ideas, challenge them to not just understand the nature and horrid expanse of the bloodshed, but the reasons for it, and the consequences of its aftermath.

The plan acknowledged the inherent limits of battlefields as venues for interpreting the Civil War and urged an expanded definition of "Civil War sites" to include those that can vividly address "causes, politics, social change, the military experience, civilian experience, and the legacy." *Holding the High Ground* also urged managers of Civil War sites to re-examine and expand how they interpret events and sites by giving voice to observers with perspectives beyond the military: civilians, slaves, and observers on the homefront. And finally, the superintendents embraced a broader set of themes that addressed everything from causes to the war's evolution to emancipation to industrialization and the civilian experience to consequences and legacy. These themes constituted not a mandate, but an option, allowing each site to embrace those that most closely fit its story and resources. The superintendents realized that not every site can effectively interpret every theme, but collectively NPS Civil War sites can convey the immensity, complexity, and enduring relevance of the Civil War.

Holding the High Ground was a working document rather than a public

proclamation. Though it received little notice outside the NPS, its vision for interpreting Civil War sites—as evidenced in new exhibits and interpretive programs—provoked an intense public debate that especially riled traditionalists. NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley took to the road to argue in favor of a new vision for Civil War sites. Congressman Jesse Jackson weighed in, inserting language in a bill that directed NPS sites to interpret "the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War." Traditionalists took to their computers and microphones in response. Given the historically gentle relationship between most white Americans and Confederate history, it is not difficult to understand why.

For decades, NPS battlefield sites had been placidly neutral places, where forgetting and remembering sometimes competed for ascendance. Staff at NPS sites had practiced history diligently and well, but usually played the role of memorialists. In the decade before the sesquicentennial, some feared that the NPS was abandoning its traditional role of honoring the men of both sides—often to the detriment of the Confederacy. A Confederate heritage advocate saw the NPS in harsh terms: "Not every ranger or guide exhibits hostility to all things Confederate," he wrote, "but, the National Park Service, as a governmental agency, **is** avowedly hostile, and plans to present the story of the War Between the States as a simple conflict between good and evil."

When in the early 2000s the NPS placed an interpretive panel in the museum at Manassas that discussed the nexus of slavery and the war, some members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans pondered a legal challenge. The SCV had once owned the heart of the battlefield at Manassas, and in conveying the land to the National Park Service in the 1930s had included a condition in the deed that required the federal government to manage and interpret the site in a way that would not detract from "the glory due Confederate heroes." To some in the SCV, the new panel on slavery in the museum did exactly that; the Park Service had "become defamatory to the memory of our ancestors," and in so doing had violated the 1936 deed restriction. Ultimately, talk of a lawsuit faded, but the episode highlighted the sensitivities of some organizations to a more scholarly interpretation of the war. The offending panel (by most measures mild in its interpretation) still stands in the museum.

The protests of heritage groups and a few individuals matter not because they threaten to derail efforts to broaden NPS interpretation at Civil War sites, but because they signal just how important the changes have been. Which brings us to the sesquicentennial itself. For much of the public, the 150th anniversary of the war has been the first time they have encountered this broader approach to interpretation at NPS sites. Harpers Ferry commenced the sesquicentennial in October 2009 with thoughtful, popular programs related to John Brown's raid. Later events focused on Lincoln's 1861 journey to Washington, fugitive slavery in Fredericksburg, emancipation at Antietam, secession at Fort Sumter, slaves at Lee's Arlington House, mobilization at the Boston Harbor Islands, and civilians at Richmond. The NPS has published new booklets on slavery as a cause of the war and explored the role of Native

Americans and other groups commonly ignored in traditional narratives.

Events during the sesquicentennial have demonstrated that the evolution of interpretation at NPS sites has largely been a process of addition, not subtraction. Events at battle sites continue to focus on the military conflict and to offer traditional interpretive and commemorative moments. At the heart of these events are the "real-time" programs, conducted on the precise ground where the battle took place precisely 150 years after the event. The proximity of time and place remains a powerful attraction to visitors to NPS sites, who have attended these programs by the thousands. But they also offer more. At Fredericksburg, "Ten Thousand Lights to Freedom" remembered the more than 10,000 slaves who crossed the Rappahannock River to freedom behind Union lines during the spring and summer of 1862. On the battle's anniversary in December, more than 2,000 visitors, surrounded by tolling bells, joined a slow procession through the streets of Fredericksburg—a program intended to connect the story of the town to the story of the battle. In 2014, the culminating commemorative event at Spotsylvania Court House will include a procession that reflects on the experience of slaves and civilians before concluding with a remembrance of the fighting men and the immense cost of war at the Bloody Angle.

At "Ten Thousand Lights to Freedom" in Fredericksburg, visitors carried, then shed, stones, symbolic of slavery. Photograph courtesy of the National Military Parks.

What has been the public response to these activities? There has been hardly a complaint, and most often the programs have been met with overwhelming praise. With few exceptions, programs have been at or near their capacity. More than 200,000 visitors attended 150th anniversary events at Gettysburg, and tens of thousands more flocked to Manassas, Richmond, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. Abetted by the incredible reach of social media, millions of people around the world have engaged with the National Park Service during the sesquicentennial of the Civil War.

Some in the field of public history have seen the sesquicentennial as an intellectual destination for the National Park Service. Once we are done with the 150th, they say, it is time to declare victory and move to the next big thing (notably the centennial of the NPS itself in 2016). But for those working at sites related to the Civil War, the 150th is a chance to gauge where the nation and the National Park Service stand in an interpretive process that will continue beyond our lifetimes. It seems clear that the vast majority of the interested public has embraced the more comprehensive and just approach to Civil War history reflected in NPS programming and media over the last twenty years. Louder than the complaints from traditionalists that the NPS has done too much are complaints from some circles—notably academics—that the NPS has not done enough. In public history, the intellectual winds rarely wane, even if they do change direction.

The changing place of the Civil War in American culture presents the National Park Service with some profound and fascinating challenges. At their root are two competing phenomena: the Park Service's traditional role as memorialists, and the increasing inclination of Americans to view the Civil War through the lens of national purpose, to lay claim to a national, not merely personal, narrative of the Civil War. As advocates for Confederate heritage clearly understand, seeing the Confederacy in terms of its purpose as a nation makes embracing the Confederacy—a nation founded in a quest to perpetuate slavery—a difficult proposition. Not long ago, the "chief of heritage defense" for the Sons of Confederate Veterans argued, "We don't need to give visitors an entire history of the antebellum South so they come away with the idea that one side was the villain."

Still, millions of Americans are descended from Confederate soldiers. Can the nation and the NPS continue to ignore or downplay the national purpose for which Confederates fought? Or should we simply help visitors distinguish between the stated purpose of the Confederacy and the myriad personal motivations that compel men to wage war for a nation? Is the Park Service's traditional role as the nation's non-partisan, bi-sectional facilitator of honor and reflection incompatible with its charge to practice robust, just history, which is often rejected as "politically correct" or "revisionist" by traditionalists? In thirty years, will the nation permit the National Park Service to manage a place called the "Stonewall Jackson Shrine?"

Here is another perspective on the same questions: can the National Park Service honor and memorialize Confederate soldiers (and by implication the Confederacy) and still hope to engage the nation's African American community in the history of the Civil War and its legacy of freedom? For all its expanded programming, the sesquicentennial has failed to alter the basic reality that African Americans largely continue to avoid events or sites associated directly with the military experience of the war. Given the recent past, it's not difficult to understand why. Clearly this is an issue that goes beyond simple programming; it might take a generation for the vast chasm between the African-American community and the legacy of the Civil War to be bridged. But, a start surely has been made during the sesquicentennial.

The National Park Service serves all Americans, with the charge to preserve places central to the nation's identity and experience. The organization, however, invariably reflects rather than leads society in its exploration of our past. When the nation demanded it in the last century, the NPS emphasized themes of shared sacrifice, courage, and reconciliation. Until the 1980s the organization gave little thought to its narrow interpretation of the war. In response to the women's rights and Civil Rights movements, the NPS has incorporated new themes in its interpretation and has expanded the number of sites deemed worthy of National Park status. Today, the National Park Service engages in a more diverse history than it did fifty years ago because our society is more diverse and demands a telling of history that reflects the experiences of its own communities and ancestors. The programming of the

National Park Service will continue to evolve over time, pulled along by the demands of the society it serves.

We are, without question, in a period of historic change as it relates to America's understanding of the Civil War. It is a messy and often painful process, especially in a nation with an aversion to cultural controversy and a preference for constancy. The sesquicentennial is not a turning point in that process, but a touchstone—a time to step back, to see and understand the progress made, and to ponder the profound challenges that lie just ahead.

Further reading

David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Edward T. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Champaign, Ill., 1991); J. Christian Spielvogel, *Interpreting Sacred Ground: The Rhetoric of National Civil War Parks and Battlefields* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2013); Kevin M. Levin, *Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder* (Lexington, Ky., 2012).

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The Second Amendment: Infringement



“[T]he debate over the meaning of the Second Amendment is surprisingly recent.”

The Awful Truth



Brown, like Melville, gives the reader the impression that he is playing with masks. You are not sure which mask is hiding his true intention, or whether he

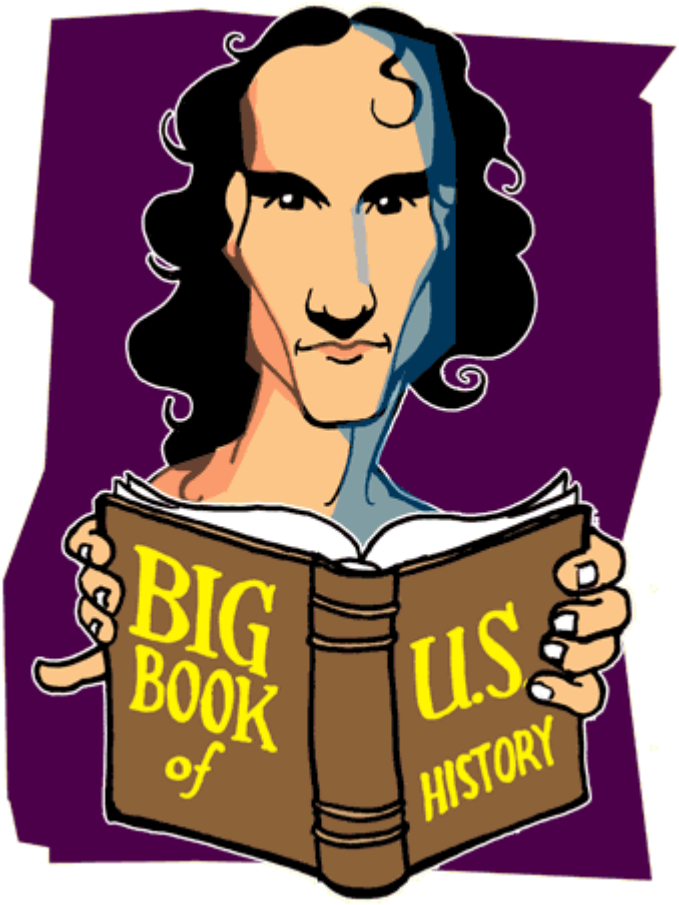
has any true intentions at all.

The Architect of Colonial Desires



Did the tragic consequences of colonialism spring from the original intent of Europeans or were they largely unexpected?

National Character



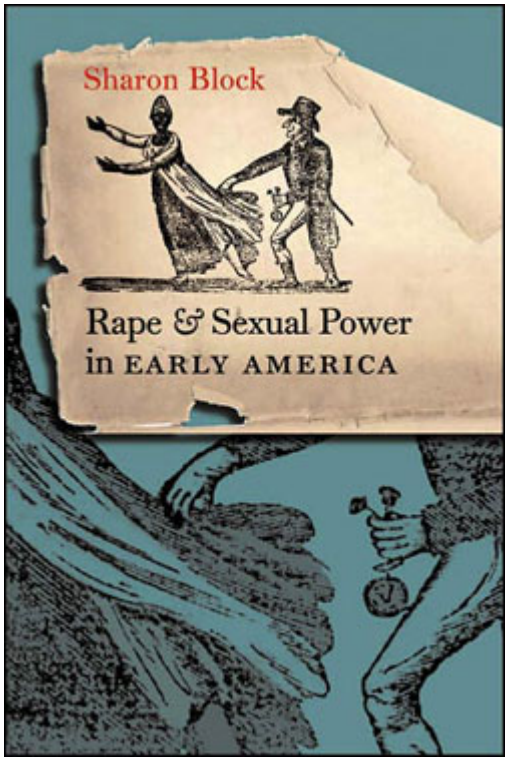
Actually, his recent body of work shows a remarkably textured, yet consistent, vision of American history.

Why I Can’t Visit the National Museum of the American Indian



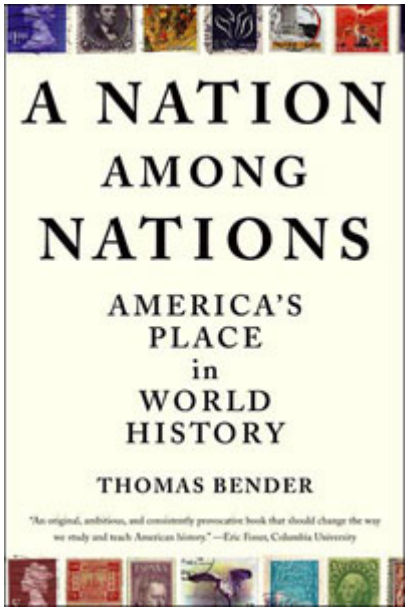
Experience, personal and otherwise, has shown me that it is not just white Americans who need to grasp the full scope of Native history. Native people can also benefit from a more just and accurate depiction of their past.

“He said I must”: Rape, Race, and Social Class in Early America



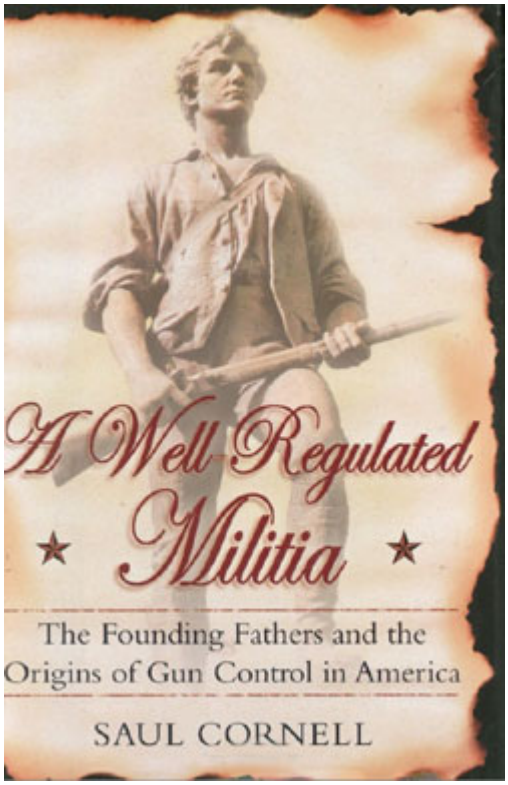
During the Revolution, allegations of rape by British soldiers in newspapers and pamphlets were construed as attacks on American rights, rather than as the violation of an individual.

Where in the World is the United States?



What Columbus discovered was less a new world than a new ocean.

Finally, a New Paradigm



In short, free American males could have owned firearms to further their personal happiness and should have owned firearms to help protect the community.

Editor’s Note: 13 for 13



… here are thirteen emerging early American scholars introducing a pre-1800 text available online to the public for free.